

Evaluating Information

Spanish Treatment of Native Americans

In the sixteenth century, a Spanish priest named Bartolomé de Las Casas argued that the Spanish *conquistadores* treated the Native Americans unnecessarily brutally. Spain's defenders claimed that the priest greatly exaggerated these atrocities. On the left is an excerpt from de Las Casas's *History of the Indies*, written around 1522. On the right is an excerpt from historian Thomas A. Bailey's *Probing America's Past: A Critical Examination of Major Myths and Misconceptions*, published in 1973. Read these passages and answer the questions that follow.

From History of the Indies

The Indians were satisfied with little, and with a minimum of cultivation, this fertile land gave them abundant sustenance. In addition, being of a delicate constitution, they could not last long in a life which abruptly plunged them into harsh labor. Up to a third died after each six or eight months' work in the mines, which was the time required of a crew to dig enough gold for melting. Who could recount the starvation, affliction and the cruel treatment these unfortunate people received not only in the mines, but wherever they were put to work? . . .

When the Spaniards saw how fast they were killing Indians in the mines, plantations, and other endeavors, caring only to squeeze the last effort out of them, it occurred to them to replenish the supply by importing people from other islands and they deceived [the king] with a crafty argument. They notified him . . . that the [islands] close to Cuba and Hispaniola were full of an idle people who had learned nothing and could not be Christianized there. Therefore, they asked permission to send two ships to bring them to Hispaniola where they could be converted and would work in the mines, thus being of service to the King.

"Were the Spaniards Empire Builders or Wreckers?"

The Spaniards no doubt killed off many aborigines in the Caribbean and slaughtered, enslaved, or worked to death immense numbers of Aztecs in Mexico and Incas in Peru. Yet the conquerors intermarried freely with these subject peoples and took vigorous steps to convert millions to Catholicism, even with the sword—"Killing for Christ." . . .

Spain not only created an empire but transplanted a culture. Long before the first crude English shelters sprang up at Jamestown, Virginia, the Spaniards in America could boast populous cities, printing presses, universities, and learned men. They introduced a higher civilization than the ones they destroyed—including a culture which in Aztec Mexico involved incredible numbers of heart-snatching human sacrifices.

1. Why were the Spanish interested in the Native Americans, according to de Las Casas? How did they treat them?
2. How did the Spanish convince their king to let them import workers from other islands?
3. How does Bailey both agree and disagree with de Las Casas? How does he defend the Spanish?
4. **Evaluation.** Bailey writes that the Spanish "introduced a higher civilization than the ones they destroyed." Is this fact or opinion? Explain.
5. **Evaluation.** Based on what you know about the *conquistadores*, do you think that de Las Casas's interpretation was accurate?
6. **Synthesis.** How would an Aztec describe the interaction between the Spanish and the Native Americans?